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AUTHOR	Stallworth, B. Joyce
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of email to extend dialogue in a secondary English methods course. The purpose of this email project was to provide opportunities for students to reflect on and respond individually to issues discussed in the methods classes and their own teaching during the clinical experiences and to provide individual guidance to the pre-service teachers. Although the email messages began as responses to issues the professor framed, as the semester progressed, students' responses became more reflective, and they exhibited growing competence and confidence as they became comfortable teaching and discussing their teaching. The dialogue forced them to think more critically about curriculum and teaching. They understood how to improve without a university supervisor telling them what they did or did not do well. In general, students responded positively to the required dialogue. In addition to outlining the project, this paper presents student responses, discusses using young adult literature in the high school English classroom, and concludes with future plans. (AEF)

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B. Joyce Stallworth, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor of English Education
Box 870231
The University of Alabama
Tuscaloosa, AL 35487
(205)348-1415
Email: jstallwo@bamaed.ua.edu
Web Site: http://www.bama.ua.edu/~jstallwo

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Introduction

Technology provides ways to access and process information, to experience audio and visual presentations, to publish, and to communicate. Further, technology is effective in developing higher-order thinking skills, including defining problems, judging information, solving problems, and drawing appropriate conclusions (Willis, Stephens, & Matthews, 1996). Wise and useful technology integration into the teaching and learning process is crucial at all levels of education because technology affords many opportunities for instruction never before available. On-line tutorials are offered at many universities; virtual field trips and Internet projects involving students across the world are common at many schools; and email and discussion groups are being used to facilitate communication, sharing, and learning from individuals in remote locations. Students can ask and answer questions, discuss literature and writing, and share the results of research in ways never before imagined. Teacher educators must use available technology to prepare pre-service teachers for 21st century classrooms.

Purpose

Capitalizing on opportunities to use technology has energized the way I conduct my English methods course. For example, I have moved to a semi-paperless course; students access my Web site for the syllabus, assignments, and course information. Further, using PowerPoint, I have created class presentations with instant links to Web resources for use during class meetings. And, I have extended communication with my students in meaningful ways. The purpose of this paper is to present one use of email to extend dialogue in my secondary English methods course.

Ten students enrolled in my course were concurrently enrolled in a 90-hour clinical placement with area master teachers. Both the methods course and the clinical placement are taken together during the semester prior to the internship. The clinical is an opportunity for methods students to practice teaching strategies specifically discussed in the methods course under the guidance of a master teacher before the internship. Students must teach a minimum of 8 classes, design a unit plan, and assist their teachers with all teaching and non-teaching duties. This sustained involvement has greatly improved the pre-service teachers' entrance into the internship.

The purpose of the email project was to (a) provide opportunities for the students to reflect on and respond individually to issues discussed in the methods class and their own teaching during the clinical experiences and (b) provide individual guidance to the pre-service teachers.

Literature Review

Integrating Technology

Technology is a powerful tool for learning, communicating, and collaborating in classrooms. Successfully using technology can encourage students to (a) define problems, (b) ask questions, (c) participate in dialogue with others inside and outside the school, and (d) assess progress by self-reflection (Corl, 1996). Technology can also enrich and improve the learning environment by instantaneously connecting classrooms to outside resources, experts, new curricula, and communication avenues (Zehr, 1998; Russel, 1995). These connections result in (a) more engaged learning by more active students, (b) increased contributions by students to the classroom knowledge base, (c) increased relevancy of learning activities, and (d) increased technological skills for

learners and educators (Bosch & Cardinale, 1993). A growing number of schools and teacher education programs are recognizing that email, the Internet, and discussion groups can be used to provide opportunities for flexible, student-centered learning among students at different levels and in different locations. Further, a growing body of research is focused on the outcomes of efforts to bring students in K-12 classrooms together in on-line learning communities with those training to become teachers (e.g., Bradley, 1998; Means, 1994). However, a report from the Office of Technology Assessment (1995) suggested that teacher educators do not sufficiently model appropriate uses of computers, email, and the Internet for instructional purposes in courses or in fieldwork. Also, the instructional technology provided to pre-service teachers tends to focus more on simple applications and less on newer, more sophisticated tools such as electronic networks, discussion groups, email, and integrated media. Therefore, more research is needed to investigate these advanced applications in specific contexts.

Language, Literacy, and Technology

English teachers must facilitate students' active engagement in reading, speaking, writing, and listening tasks. Integrating technology in instruction is one way to encourage that active engagement. Kinzer & Leu (1997) discussed the importance of technology in the teaching and learning of literacy. They suggested that English teachers must become more insightful about technology in order to understand how various applications can support literacy instruction. Noden & Vacca (1994) specifically suggested that email and discussion group communication can facilitate important literacy learning opportunities for students by making reading and writing authentic. Such exchanges are authentic "talk." For example, one project described by McKeon

(1997) focused on pre-service teachers' discussions with fourth graders about the trade books the fourth graders read. The project was successful because (a) students were involved in an active process of language use and learning; (b) important learning connections were made; and (c) the email partners got to know each other socially as they shared information, asked questions, and responded to literature. A similar project from the Kentucky Telecommunications Writing Project connected students in different Kentucky schools with each other for email conversations about books they were all reading (Bell et. al., 1995). Such applications are consistent with many of the standards outlined by the National Council of Teachers of English (1996) including an emphasis on students' abilities to use a variety of technological resources to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. More collaborative efforts that involve the integration of technology will be necessary to create authentic learning opportunities and to facilitate active student engagement in 21st century classrooms (Office of Technology Assessment, 1995).

Teacher Education

Research (e.g., Zeichner, 1992) has suggested that pre-service teachers must have multiple opportunities to practice and reflect on teaching strategies discussed in teacher preparation courses before they can successfully use those strategies in the internship. Goodlad et al. (1990) also discussed the importance of increased occasions for teaching, learning routines, and reflecting on teaching as a profession. These opportunities are necessary so that pre-service teachers to learn how to translate theory into practice; to transfer their knowledge in ways their students/future students could understand, internalize, and use (Good, 1990).

High school teachers have also suggested that before teacher education students begin the internship, they need to (a) have ongoing and sustained conversations about teaching; (b) practice strategies discussed in teacher education courses; (c) learn how to manage non-teaching duties; and (d) have opportunities for reflection. Methods courses are usually the final opportunity before the internship for students to practice planning for instruction, implementing instruction, evaluating instruction, and reflecting on instruction. Using technology in the methods course can facilitate that learning process while giving students meaningful opportunities to use technology.

Methods

The research questions addressed were: (a) how well did students internalize, articulate, and use effective teaching principles and practices taught in the methods course, (b) what were the students' perceptions of communicating via email with their professor, and (c) how can students' reflections, responses, and evaluations be used to improve the teaching and learning process in the methods course and in clinical experiences.

Data Collection

The students responded to bi-weekly professor developed queries based on class readings, discussions, and feedback from their clinical experiences. As the semester progressed, the queries became less structured because a discussion of teaching in the clinical placements became more important. At the end of the course, students evaluated the semester long dialogue with the professor. Simple questions on their final examination asked them to rate the process and solicited their feedback on the usefulness of the dialogue.

Analysis

Students' reflections and evaluations were read carefully, coded, and placed into categories according to the following emergent themes: (a) learning to teach; (b) understanding contexts for teaching; (c) non-teaching responsibilities; and (d) relationships and socialization issues. Preliminary conclusions were constructed, revised, and written into a final version (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The findings informed the planning of the course and field assignments for the next time that I offered the course. Additionally, the findings informed a new email project discussed here under "Future Directions."

Discussion

As the semester progressed, my agenda became less important as students' responses became more reflective. They exhibited growing competence and confidence as they became comfortable teaching and discussing their teaching. The dialogue forced them to think more critically about curriculum and teaching. This became evident in their late semester discussions and self-evaluations. They understood how to improve without a university supervisor telling them what they did or did not do well. For example, Kym became concerned about her ability to successfully work with students of color. She found that her expectations for students of color were sometimes lower because she her teacher said, "You can't expect much from this bunch"; she also feared confrontation and consequently was lenient. She stated, "I didn't want the students to think I was picking on them just because they were black." We communicated at length about the differences between high academic expectations and bias. All students must

have teachers who demand their best; our failure to communicate those expectations only leads to additional conflicts and behavior issues.

My role as a teacher educator of color working primary with white pre-service teachers is particularly important. Our interactions were also opportunities for powerful personal cross-race exchanges. Research (e.g., Wlodkowski and Ginsberg, 1995) has supported the notion that students learn acceptance, respect, and appreciation of differences through personal encounters rather than reading about or being told how they should act. For example, during one class discussion about using multicultural literature, Laura, a 21-year-old, white, female, pre-service teacher who had spent her entire life in rural Alabama, stated that she just had never considered the relevance of using literature by minority authors because none her teachers had ever included any. Using multicultural literature was a completely new idea for this pre-service teacher. My different perspective on using diverse literature helped her think differently about curriculum. I am not suggesting that my ethnicity was the only factor working in this exchange; rather, my perspective has been informed by different experiences, my ethnicity, and my cultural background. Talking about our different perspectives helped both of us. Therefore, the most important outcome of the dialogue was the opportunity to work through difficult issues in an atmosphere based on trust, mutual respect, shared risk, commitment, and collaboration.

In general, the students responded positively to this required dialogue. Although the emails began as superficial responses to issues I framed, they became more productive as the dialogue became more focused on major issues about learning to teach including topics like teaching with a multicultural perspective, using young adult

literature, planning, and assessment. Sample responses are outlined below to illustrate typical responses from the students.

Defining the English Curriculum

We began the semester looking at conceptions of the English curriculum. We read articles about defining a coherent English curriculum. The students were asked to discuss with their clinical teachers how they determined the content of the curriculum and their methods of instruction. They also asked students what they considered "good" practices in their English classes. After her first two weeks of observations, Jenn discussed the importance of considering the students when making curricula decisions. For example, she believed that many of the literature selections were simply boring to students. She stated, "I believe students will not be as apt to become bored or disinterested with the curriculum if educators will provide newer and more up-to-date materials to go along with older works." When I asked her why teachers were less willing to try new titles, she responded, "This will require more work from teachers. Many teachers are just not willing to make the effort." Rebecca responded in a similar fashion. She stated,

> A lot of teachers find it easier to follow the old way of teaching like teaching specific information in chronological order instead of using themes or issues or ideas to provide a framework for units. Students need to be motivated and have an active role in any classroom. With the old and boring traditional curriculum, students are not placed first and are forced to follow a traditional learning pattern. . . Students need to be active participants and need to think for themselves.

Kym stressed a point that is common when teachers talk about revising the literature curricula. She stated,

> I do not believe that all of the traditional literature should be abandoned simply because it is not interesting to the student. This literature contains important ideas and concepts that students need to know. . . Students and teachers need to

> continue to add to these traditional works so that future generations of students will continue to identify with and benefit from literature and not be restricted by it.

These and similar comments helped me frame questions for follow up discussions in class and for additional readings about curriculum. For example, we looked at our state's course of study and the English language arts national standards. Learning how to translate state objectives into meaningful guidelines for making literature selections is a difficult process that takes time.

Using Young Adult Literature

Many of the pre-service and in-service teachers with whom I work are initially very skeptical about using young adult literature in the high school English classroom. Some question its usefulness and literary merit; others equate it with less serious juvenile series books of old; and many upper high school teachers always want an explanation of how such literature could possibly be used to address the objectives in our state's 11th or 12th grade course of study. One of my primary purposes for including the reading of young adult and multicultural novels is exposure. Many students have never read some of the wonderful contemporary young adult titles which really speak to today's young adults. Young people are more likely to view reading as pleasurable and become life-long readers if they are introduced to literature containing plots consistent with their experiences, themes of interest to them, main characters who are young adults, and language that corresponds to their own language (Bushman & Bushman, 1997). They are motivated to read when they see characters and situations reflecting their own experiences. Therefore, we explore several high-quality contemporary young adult novels that will interest secondary students *and* help them internalize literary elements

such as tone, characterization, plot, setting, and symbolism -- the same elements found in *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or other staples in the English curriculum. Cheryl commented on her discoveries as follows:

> I have learned so much about integrating young adult literature into the language arts classroom. I guess more than anything, I didn't realize the availability and flexibility of using young adult literature. Now that I know how simple it is to integrate different selections into units, I know that it is just a matter of putting time and effort into research and reading. . . I think that integrating young adult literature is a way to connect with our student in a way that might not otherwise be possible.

Because the young adult literature course I offer is not required, conversations in the methods course about young adult literature were very beneficial. David responded in one of his reflections as follows:

> I was not able to take the young adult literature course. However, as a result of our class discussions and reading assignments, I have a new respect for young adult literature and its usefulness in the classroom. Many students are reluctant readers because they think "schoolish" literature is beyond their understanding or is irrelevant to their conditions. Young adult literature seems to be a viable answer to both of these arguments. . . .

Finally, Helena and Mike framed two of their responses based on what they saw in their clinical placements. Helena concluded:

> From what I am witnessing in my clinical placement, students are not motivated to read something that they don't understand, or that requires lengthy explanations in order to make sense. If students get the impression that all literature is dull, boring, and full of literary devices that must be analyzed and sorted out, then we are going to loose a generation of potential readers. . . Integration of young adult literature in the curriculum increases student motivation to read since they are reading about topics that specifically relate to them.

Mike stated,

> Young adult literature is written in a contemporary style and language that students can understand. . . It is imperative that we not exclude anyone from the circles of literacy. If a student cannot grasp the required "classic" dictated by the curriculum, chances are that the student will become frustrated and turn against reading. We loose that student as a life-long reader. . . I truly believe that young

> adult literature can prevent us from turning out a generation of young adults whose video tape cabinets are full, but whose book shelves are empty.

English classrooms must be alive, inclusive, authentic, and meaningful for all students. English teachers must consider choice and variety in their selections. Making wise decisions based on students' interests and needs is so important in helping them begin to value reading and see the rich diversity in quality literature. Such decisions can increase the likelihood that students will find some pleasure and enjoyment in reading and will want to read more (Gallo, 1992). There is room in the English curriculum for traditional literature, multicultural literature, contemporary literature, and most certainly, young adult literature.

Conclusions

I only had ten students in this course. Responding to them in a timely and meaningful manner became very tedious, especially at the beginning. Also, trying to frame follow up questions and find additional readings and examples of lessons that surfaced during our dialogues became increasingly difficult. Further, the pre-service teachers also became very concerned about the number of "required" reflections. I understand now that I should not have scheduled as many responses as I did. As one student pointed out, "I just don't have anything else to say." Reflections should be spontaneous responses to teaching and learning; I was overly concerned with how much the students had to say. Therefore, one change will be fewer required emails to me. Also, structure is important, but I will not dictate the topic as much. Prompting students to take more control is important. I will ask more questions and provide fewer readings. I want the students to use their prior experiences, their teaching experiences, and the

information discussed in class to come up with their own theories of teaching and conduct their own searches to find support for their positions.

Future Directions

As a result of this use of technology, the email project will be extended to high school students during the Spring semester, 1999. One area English teacher and I have developed a project designed to improve her students' literacy skills and provide my students with additional opportunities to practice pedagogical skills. The project is entitled, "Using Email and Electronic Discussion Groups to Facilitate Dialogue Between High School Students and Pre-Service English Methods Students: A Collaborative Effort to Improve Teaching and Learning." It is designed to

- To provide opportunities for my pre-service English teachers to use effective teaching strategies and to interact appropriately with high school students before the internship;
- To assist one English teacher with literacy teaching; and
- To provide opportunities for high school students and pre-service teachers to use available technology to engage in purposeful dialogue.

This action research project will focus on the use of email and discussion groups in the teaching and learning process in a high school English classroom and in an English methods course. The following research questions will guide the study:

1. How do email dialogue and discussion group communication impact high school students' perceptions of literacy learning in an English classroom?
2. What are the participants' perceptions of the academic and social outcomes of electronic dialogue?

3. What are the participants' perceptions of the relevance and usefulness of electronic dialogue?

The first few sessions will be structured by the English teacher and me in order to set an appropriate agenda for the semester. Later topics will emerge as the English teacher assigns various reading and writing tasks. All participants will read one common novel and email literary responses to each other. My students will ask and answer questions about the commonly read novel, offer responses and advice on studying literature and writing, read their high school students' papers before the assignments are due, and offer additional information and assistance as students work through various assignments and activities.

The discussion group will be an opportunity for all of us to participate and share. For example, my students might post questions for the high school students on topics like (a) their beliefs about the characteristics of highly effective teachers, (b) why some high school students turn to violence at school, or (c) peer pressure and responsibilities teens face. Students' voices are very important as we prepare pre-service teachers for managing today's secondary classrooms. Although we do not wish to censor what is discussed, we will ensure that the transmissions remain ethical and meaningful. Findings from this study will be used to (a) revise and improve this method of collaboration, (b) continue to infuse technology into teacher education courses, and (c) seek external funding for more extensive collaboration among other area secondary English teachers, their students, and pre-service teachers.

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